

APS to spend \$34 million to cut down bark beetle trees in Arizona

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Arizona Public Service estimates it will cost the utility nearly \$34 million to cut down all the dead pine trees along its electrical power lines in Arizona.

APS isn't including the cost in its pending Arizona Corporation Commission application for a rate increase, instead hoping that the federal government will help, said Alán Bunnell, APS manager of external communications.

APS hopes the Federal Emergency Management Agency will change its

mind and provide emergency money as Gov. Janet Napolitano requested last year, or that higher officials such as President George W. Bush will intervene.

"This is really a federal issue," said Mike Neal, APS manager of forestry and special programs.

Arizona Corporation Commissioner Kris Mayes, a native of Prescott, agreed that the federal government should help.

"It is a huge problem," Mayes said. "Why are we potentially looking at the ratepayers picking up the \$34 million tab?"

APS briefed the Corporation Commission Jan. 15 about its commissioned study that came up with the nearly \$34 million price tag.

The federal government provided \$5 million to help California utilities cut down dead trees that the bark beetle epidemic has killed after years of drought, Neal noted.

A clause in the APS permits for lines through national forests states that APS must remove trees that create hazards to its lines, said Steve Sams, public services program leader on the Prescott National Forest.

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"The presence of their lines creates the need to remove the trees," Sams said.

APS has 2,100 miles of power lines running through ponderosa pine forests in Arizona, and about 90 percent are on federal land, Neal said.

Private landowners with lines on their property have been generally cooperative about APS efforts, said Robert Pleger, APS northwest division forester based in Prescott.

Experts hired by APS

estimated that 748,586 dead trees will stand within 150 feet of APS power corridors by the year 2006, and it will cost \$33.69 million to cut them down and remove them, at an average cost of \$45 per tree.

APS already spent \$2.4 million last year on the plan, and expects to spend \$9 million this year, Neal said.

Pleger hopes his crews can cut down all the dead trees along APS distribution power lines and transmission lines in the Prescott and Crown King areas before this year's fire season begins in the spring.

APS officials expect to finish all the work on the Arizona project by 2006.

The utility has 30 APS crews of two to three people working on the project, plus dozens of contract tree cutters.

The Prescott Basin contains a large percentage of those dead trees. In the APS study, six parts of the basin were among the top 10 priority areas for tree removal. Another was near Crown King.

The area south of Walker has the highest pine mortality in Arizona near power lines, the study concluded.